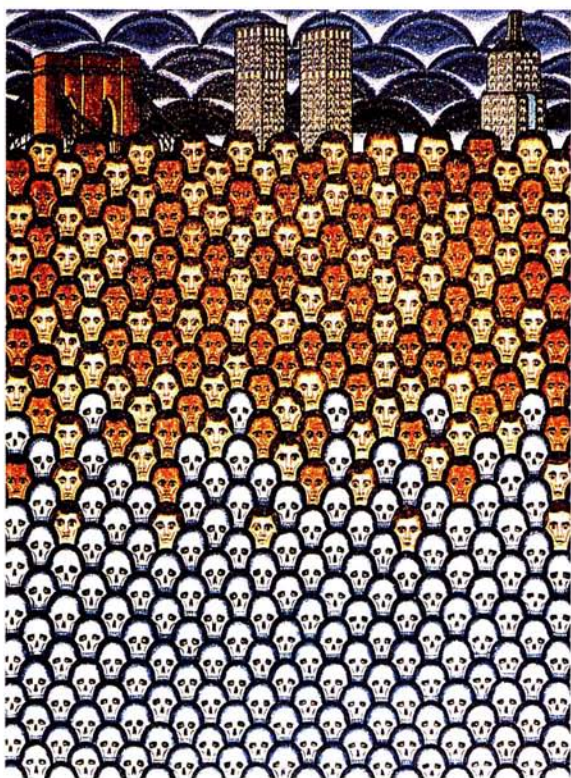


The Roger Brown Mosaic

at Foley Square,
New York



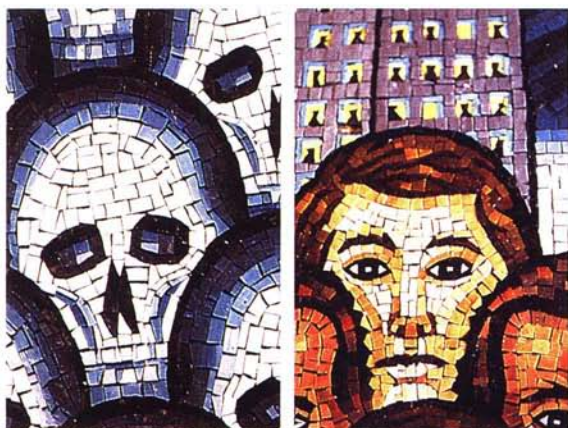
The Roger Brown Mosaic

Installed high on a wall, vividly patterned, and unsparing in its image of mortality, Roger Brown's mosaic lends a compelling presence to the sky-lit Duane Street entrance of 290 Broadway. Even without the artist's statement (printed elsewhere in this brochure and displayed near the artwork), there is much for the eye to take in. Look up and you see a tapestry of skulls conjoined like giant hexagonal tiles. Look higher and the skulls become a sea, of gaunt faces—black, white, many hues in between—rising to a New York cityscape where stylized depictions of the Brooklyn Bridge, World Trade Towers, and Empire State Building appear amid dark, wedge-shaped clouds. Jewel-like and yet horrific, Brown's honeycomb composition hovers somewhere between old-world cathedral art and Cambodian killing field, with a dose of M.C. Escher-type psychedelia and the mixed-message festiveness of Day of the Dead or Hallowe'en decoration. Its archaeological tone underscored by the mosaic medium, the work reads like a

subterranean cross-section of an urban gravesite. And logically so. The Mosaic is sited above New York's widely celebrated African Burial Ground.

This 18th-century resting place for ten to twenty thousand enslaved Africans and working-class people, a corner of which was discovered during digging to create a foundation for 290 Broadway, is commemorated in a grassy plot next to Brown's artwork and will be explored in a planned education center behind it. Before construction resumed, an archaeology project yielded the skeletal remains of over 400 people and related artifacts that continue to be studied today by scholar-scientists at Howard University in Washington, D.C. For the thousand of New Yorkers who followed the excavation in the news and visited the site, the episode was deep, emotionally loaded. Exposing a hidden history, the Burial Ground underscored not only hardship and socio-economic divisions but also connections with the African motherland. Its discovery and contents thwarted the notion that slavery had been the exclusive domain of the American South.

Brown's imagery, as noted above, pays homage to the African Burial Ground, but the core theme of the mosaic, as the artist tells us in his statement, is the tragic toll of the AIDS epidemic. Brown's "mosaic of death heads in memory of those of all races who have suffered and died too soon" stunningly visualizes the indiscriminate march of the disease in a city that, as of 1995, has had more



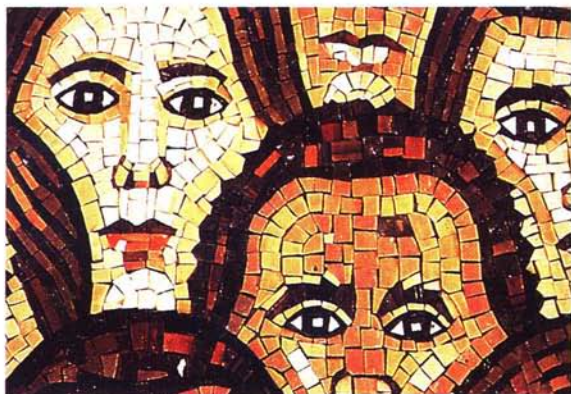


reported AIDS cases than Los Angeles, San Francisco, Dallas, and Washington, D.C., combined. Brown, who is based in Chicago also hit hard by AIDS, tackled this difficult theme after careful, intuitive deliberation fed by the implications of the African Burial Ground. As he explains, "My theme uses the gaunt faces of AIDS victims interspersed by race and contrasted to the skulls of the slavery victims found in the Black cemetery. The city rises in the background as if growing out of the heap of human misery left behind."

An Alabama native raised in the God-fearing Church of Christ, Brown is known for the disturbing edge with which his clear, emblematic compositions record contemporary life. His style was first formed at commercial design school in Chicago, where he moved after dropping out of religious college in Tennessee. As a student at the Art Institute of Chicago, Brown absorbed a smorgasbord of influences that still inform his vision: folk art, flea-market kitsch, film-noir, Surrealism, Japanese prints, Native American art, and early Renaissance painting. Bucking the tide of New York Minimalism, Brown and like-minded Chicago "Imagists" pursued an eccentric, narrative, communicative art in the late 1960s with a quirky intensity not approached locally until the emergence of the manic, street-smart styles of East Village artists in the 1980s. Frequently finding its way to publications (including Time Magazine covers on September 17, 1990, and April 19, 1993), Brown's work has been exhibited in New York since 1975 and is represented in

three of its museums. The artist's attraction to horrific news-driven subjects, which he paints along with cityscapes and tourist vistas, makes AIDS a natural theme for him to pursue.

Brown has worked on a mosaic project before—an allegory of arts and science in the form of Icarus and Daedalus in flight for a financial office building in Chicago in 1992. This method of imagemaking, in which shaped stone, ceramic, or glass tiles are set into concrete, dates back to pre-Roman times—the Minoan culture of ancient Crete—and can be seen in countless older buildings and subway stations in New York. Late Medieval Italy was a highpoint for large-scale wall mosaics in the byzantine style used in churches (before being supplanted by fresco) to illustrate the Bible. One such work near Venice, *The Last Judgement* at The Santa Maria Assunta basilica in Torcello, struck Brown strongly when he saw a portion of it reproduced in a book. Processed along with everything else implied by the project, this turgid image of Hell (see right panel, below) became a primary source for the mosaic. Brown painted his own composition onto canvas. His image was then transformed by trained artisans in Stilimbergo, Italy, a centuries-old mosaic fabrication center (also near Venice, as it happens), where Brown had overseen the production of his first project in the medium. The complex scheme of glass tiles matching Brown's lines, shadings and colors was again created to his satisfaction, and the assembled mosaic was sent from Italy on 12 wood panels to the United States to be hoisted and installed at 290 Broadway.



The mosaic creates its own aura in this government building—a kind of noncorporate public space Brown considers a “cathedral for our time”—and like all art, opens itself to multiple levels of meaning and understanding. The upward surge of skulls to humans implies a Torcello-like Armageddon. Multiple identities make up a whole in this work, which resonates with the AIDS quilt. Pondering this mosaic, one might also be reminded, with a profound irony given its siting at the African Burial Ground, of the massive toll of AIDS deaths, which is expected to reach some 70 percent of the world's total, in Africa. Especially when paired with 290 Broadway's other two commissioned artworks—Houston Conwill's monastic floor piece mapping the African diaspora and Clyde Lynd's spiritually uplifting eagle-wing with pinpoint lights—the mosaic opens distinctive doors for contemplation.

Brown's overriding theme is death. Distanced by a culture that often prefers the burlesque of TV violence, horror movies and sound-bites to the real thing, this fact of life deserves, at least occasionally, to be contemplated.

— Sidney Lawrence

*Organizer of "Roger Brown" (1987)
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.*



Left: *The Last Judgment*, Roger Brown (1987), African Burial Ground, New York

Roger Brown

1944 Born in Hamilton, Alabama

1962-1964 American Academy of Art

1964-1968 BFA, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago

1968-1970 MFA, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Public Collections

Akron Art Institute, Ohio

American Telephone and Telegraph, New York

The Art Institute of Chicago

Atlantic Richfield Co., San Francisco

Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana

Blue Cross of Southern California

Continental Bank, Amsterdam

Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Dallas, Texas

Equitable Corporation/on site commission for NBC Tower

First National Bank, Chicago

High Museum of Art, Atlanta

Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana

Main Bank, Chicago

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Montgomery Museum of Art, Alabama

Museum Boymans, Rotterdam

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

Museum of Modern Art, New York

Museum Moderner Kunst/Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts, Vienna

National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.

Northern Trust Bank, Chicago

Playboy Collection, Chicago

Prudential Insurance Company, New Jersey

Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh

The State of Illinois Collection, Chicago

United Bank of Denver, Colorado

Weatherspoon Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

One - Person Exhibitions

Art Museum of the University of California, Berkeley, CA, 1980

Asher/Faure Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, 1983, 88

John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, CA, 1986

Linda Cathcart Gallery, Santa Monica, CA, 1993

Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX, 1981

Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA, 1987

Fendrick Gallery, Washington, D.C., 1987

David Heath Gallery, Atlanta, GA, 1990

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., 1987

La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, CA, 1988

Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL, 1987

Mayor Gallery, London, UK, 1981

Montgomery Museum of Fine Art, Montgomery, AL, 1980

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL, 1981

Nexus Gallery, Atlanta, GA, 1984

North Carolina Museum of Art Raleigh, NC, 1984

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA, 1974, 80

Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago, IL, 1971, 73, 74, 76, 77, 79, 86, 88, 91, 94

Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York, NY, 1975, 77, 79, 81, 82, 84, 85, 87, 89, 92, 95

Arthur Roger Gallery, New Orleans, LA, 1988, 1990

Galerie Darthea Speyer, Paris, France, 1974

St. Louis Museum, St. Louis, MO, 1980

Texas Gallery, Houston, TX, 1985

University of South Florida, Tampa, FL, 1984

The Value of Creative Expression

Art in Federal Buildings has been an American tradition since 1855 when Congress commissioned frescoes to be painted in committee rooms of the United States House of Representatives in Washington, D.C. Today the General Services Administration (GSA) proudly continues this heritage with the acquisition of fine art for Federal buildings through the Art-in-Architecture Program.

More than 170 works of art have been commissioned by GSA since the Art-in-Architecture Program was established in 1963. One of the recent additions to the national collection is the Roger Brown mosaic at the Foley Square Federal Building at 290 Broadway.

Art commissioned by GSA reflects our nation's cherished commitment to individual expression and creativity. Historically, the United States has relied on individuals from all walks of life to challenge the present and create the future. Creativity has, from the drafting of the Constitution to the development of today's technology, been one of our most prized resources.

Thus, the public art that graces Federal buildings portrays the spirit of the nation. It reflects the full range of our experiences, passions, expressions, and hopes. It is everything we are – sometimes serene, quiet, and introspective; at other times bold, confident, and unrestrained. Art commissioned through GSA's Art-in-Architecture is for everyone – local residents who come to a Federal building on business and visitors who wish to see and enjoy the art. It is part of a heritage of creativity and individual expression preserved for all American citizens, those of today and the future.

The nomination and selection process for commissioning art in Federal buildings follows guidelines established over the past 30 years.

One-half of one percent (00.5%) of the estimated construction cost of a new Federal building is set aside for Art-in-Architecture projects. A Community Art Panel, composed of local art professionals, community representatives and the building's architect, makes recommendations to GSA about the type and location of the artwork to be commissioned. The panel also reviews artists' portfolios and nominates a list of 3 to 5 artists to create the artwork.

GSA then selects and contracts one of the nominated artists to develop a design concept. The artist's proposal is reviewed by the panel, which submits a recommendation to GSA. After accepting the design proposal, GSA commissions the artwork.

Statement by Roger Brown

On this ancient cemetery site below the modern skyline of New York City a contemporary tapestry of human faces, each made thin and hollow by the ravages of AIDS, descends like some medieval nightmare into a mosaic of death heads in memory of those of all races who have suffered and died too soon.



GSA maintains a registry of artists who have expressed interest in commissions for Federal artwork.

Artists who wish to be placed in the registry should contact:

Art-in-Architecture Program

U.S. General Services Administration
18th & F Streets, NW
Room 7308
Washington, D.C. 20405
202.501.0048



U.S. General Services Administration
Public Buildings Service
New York